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**Testimony Before the New York Joint Legislative Hearing
Committee on Finance
February 01, 2022**

**Testimony of Crystal Oh, Project Coordinator
The Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, Inc. (KCS)**

Good afternoon. My name is Crystal Oh, and I am a Project Coordinator at Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, Inc (KCS). The **NYC Council Viral Hepatitis Initiative** is the strongest public health response to the hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C (HCV) virus epidemics that have hit NYC's communities. The Initiative funds at least 34 organizations to connect people at risk of hepatitis B and/or hepatitis C to prevention, testing, care and treatment, and specifically serves those at highest risk for hepatitis B and C, HIV, overdose, and COVID-19. It also supports training and education programs for over 2,000 clinical providers, patient navigators, and syringe exchange program peers combined. As a result, these individuals are able to provide critical services for outreach, diagnostic testing, linkage-to-care, medical evaluation, and support through treatment.

As a program provider of the Viral Hepatitis Initiative since 2014, KCS has dedicated itself to the prevention of hepatitis B through widespread free testing, education, and providing culturally competent patient navigation services for Koreans and Asian Americans with chronic infections. The vast majority of those we serve are community members of immigrant backgrounds, low-income status, limited English proficiency, and lack of healthcare coverage. Moreover, since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the enactment of the statewide PAUSE order, KCS has been on the frontlines assisting the many suffering individuals across the city and sustaining our support for existing patients.

Although the impact of COVID-19 has had far-reaching consequences on the city's financial wellbeing, I would like to emphasize the widespread impact that the on-going pandemic has had on our community, especially for those living in Queens, and the individuals we serve through the Viral Hepatitis Initiative. As highlighted before, the majority of our patients are immigrants who face significant disparities in accessing health services and outcomes. Likewise, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on these same demographics, many of whom live in Queens, which currently has the highest number of infected individuals.

While navigating the present crisis is of the foremost importance for the sake of all New Yorkers, our collective health, and economic stability, I ask you to keep in mind that hepatitis B/C and other health

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issues have not disappeared, and will only exacerbate the current hardships for many vulnerable residents. In spite of the difficult economic situation and budgetary concerns the city and state faces, I ask that you support full restoration of **Article 6 matching funds**, which helps to support critical services that are provided by local health departments, including viral hepatitis, health education, and health insurance access. This support will also help frontline community organizations like KCS to reach and treat vulnerable NYC residents impacted by Hep B/C, in alignment with the newly adopted Viral Hepatitis Elimination Plan, which was developed in conjunction with the NYC DOHMH for the elimination of viral hepatitis by 2030. Not only is sustaining this initiative a comparatively small expense in the larger context of the budget, but also, the resulting effects made possible by this support will help drive down the overall financial impact that hepatitis B and C have on our health system every year.

Without your continued support, thousands of New Yorkers will face severe health complications from hepatitis, and innumerable others will be at risk of contracting the disease. These individuals already face disproportionate socioeconomic inequalities, and the culturally competent programs funded by the Viral Hepatitis Initiative make a tangible and efficacious impact on the on-going hepatitis epidemic. Approximately 241,000 NYC residents are estimated to be infected with chronic hepatitis B, and 91,000 people are believed to be infected with chronic hepatitis C. Given these high rates of infection, it is crucial to sustain the Viral Hepatitis Initiative not only to address this largely overlooked health crisis, but as NYC and NYS currently serves as both a model and beacon of hope for similar initiatives across the nation and the world.

I sincerely thank the members of the Joint Legislative Hearing and the respective committees here today for supporting the efforts of CBOs like KCS in the past. Truly, without your backing, our work for the community and assistance for at-risk individuals would not be possible. I would also like to praise you for the dedication and work you have all done on behalf of NYC residents like myself. We are all in this together, and with your leadership, I am confident that we will emerge stronger, more empathetic, and more unified than ever before.

Sincerely,

Crystal Oh

Project Coordinator

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